-Transitions-

Mental Illness to Mental Wellness

A Recovery Art and Narratives Project
Foreword

I was extremely fortunate to research people’s experiences of engaging with art for my MSc research. As an Occupational Therapist I have also always had an innate belief in the role of creativity to facilitate expression. The stories people told about the meaning behind their art during my research inspired me to try and co-ordinate a recovery arts and narratives project across Dorset; it was here the Transitions journey began.

This project has modelled true partnership working and a sharing of expertise; through the use of an Artist and a Peer Specialist. The artist involved has been able to nurture creative ideas, this, accompanied with a sharing of common ground with a peer specialist has enabled people to provide their narratives. The following pages demonstrate the amazing insights and inspiring stories people can share. I hope you enjoy the exhibition and are able to take from it a sense of hope and optimism. It is amazing what people can achieve when given the opportunity, even when in the depths of crisis.

Many thanks,

Jackie Lawson
Recovery Co-lead
Dorset Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust
Pictures speak louder than words

Like all good sayings there is some truth in that statement but together words and pictures can be even more powerful. Take the above stunning and colourful image. It is both striking and interesting.

But let’s add some words, a narrative. This picture was drawn by Calvin, a man who had been attending Kings Park Day Hospital in Bournemouth. He’s an older gentleman who was struggling with a depressive illness and anxiety.

This is how he describes his picture, “My mood goes through stages. The black shows the lows and the bright colours joy. The squiggly lines represent my anxiety.”
Suddenly, with just those few words the picture takes on a whole new depth and meaning. It’s now that we understand the meaning behind the picture that we can really connect with the artist. We can better understand his situation and the important message he wants to communicate to us. We share something powerful through the exchange of ideas, feelings and emotions using the medium of Recovery Art and Narratives.

So, what do we mean by Recovery?

Recovery is about living a meaningful and rewarding life as defined by the individual whether they are experiencing mental health symptoms or not. It represents the movement from pathology and illness to strength and wellbeing. Hope is an essential part of recovery. A sense of control over our life is also very important, as is witnessing the process of recovery that others have gone through.

Throughout this project we have attempted to create a group that would allow people the space to explore their own recovery process through art. We then asked them to describe their art, what it meant to them and how it made them feel.

This incorporates the narrative aspect. This project is fundamentally an art project and the narrative aspect relates to the story of the specific art works and the artists description of that art.
The narratives in this project like many of the pictures themselves are succinct and precise. They explain and describe the pictures, the feelings and thoughts behind them which are both insightful and powerful. There is something about this brevity that works well with the art. Because of this the narratives add to the art rather than becoming a distraction or distracting from them.

The project was held at three sites. The Crisis Centre at Hahnemann House in Bournemouth is a day hospital for people who are of working age and who are in need of some support during a period of particular psychiatric distress. The service is provided in 2 week blocks to help support people in the community and to try and keep people out of hospital.

Kings Park Day Hospital in Bournemouth is a day hospital for older people with a need for psychiatric support. In this environment support and social contact can help keep people well in the community and again prevent admission.

Kimmeridge Court at St Ann’s Hospital in Poole is an eating disorder treatment centre that has both out-patient and in-patient facilities. It offers places to people from Dorset and the surrounding counties and assists in the treatment of eating disorders.
The project was co-facilitated by Babs Barrow and Paul Siebenthal. Babs is a local artist of many years experience who works in several different media. Her work is being shown in several galleries locally.

Paul works for the Dorset Mental Health Forum as a Peer Specialist and is also involved in developing the Forum’s Recovery Narrative project and workshops. He is a keen writer and is interested in all aspects of the arts.

In his work as a Peer Specialist he uses his lived experience of Depression, Asperger’s Syndrome and Bulimia to help fight stigma and to help others to understand their own mental health better.

What follows are pictures created during the project. The narratives, comments and quotes of the artists. As well as Paul’s own interpretation and responses to the art as a co-facilitator and a peer specialist.
Art from the Hahnemann House

“I want to change the picture in my mind, so that this scene is the last I see, to the first thing I see on an early morning, facing it with some hope instead of dread.”
Anon.

This image and statement illustrates the true power of recovery art in giving people the outlet of expression through words and pictures.

Anon, Hahnemann House

This picture reflects the artist’s love of growing flowers, vegetables and herbs. They saw themselves at sea and said they felt they were, “struggling against the storms of life”. The heart image, they said reflected that their heart was too big to be kept inside. It reflected that they felt too much love.
Corrine lived on a farm when she was young and has fond associations with cows. On the table in the art room was a mug with pens in, she saw the picture of a cow on it and this inspired her picture and her words. In the sentence, “We can all be beautiful,” I was struck by her desire to have a positive effect on people. What a hopeful sentiment and one that fits in well with the process of recovery.

Lauren’s mouse picture shows the interesting assumptions that one can make about the nature of a picture.

What is interesting with Lauren is the relationship and meaning that mice have for her. Lauren keeps both mice and rats. She told me that the reason she loves mice so much is because, “mice naturally fear you and are terrified of you as a predator. They see themselves as being at the bottom of the food-chain. They learn gradually not to see you as a threat. When they eventually trust you, it’s such a great feeling, it’s love!”
“This picture is to me the idea that life is a journey in which progress should be constant. There are many finish lines that we believe will end the journey but each line we cross brings another. The ball and chain represents the feelings I try and run from. Wherever I go they are there, sharing and expressing them can often reduce them.

The countryside represents where I am feeling happy. Each flash of green or breath of salty air erodes the feelings like rust would the ball and chain. Throwing the feelings away will normally result in them returning bigger, halting your progress more. Take time out of the journey, observe the race, remember where you started, appreciate the surroundings and you may feel the race easier to run.”

Sam, Hahnemann House, Crisis Centre.

For an eloquent description of the recovery process and a pictorial representation look no further. Sam manages to sum it all up beautifully through his picture and his supporting narrative explanation of his work. Sam went on to produce an even more personal description of his recovery process. What follows shows Sam’s deep understanding of what he needs to do in order to get and stay well.
“To me this picture symbolises how much we have a choice in how we feel. Choosing drugs, alcohol and building boundaries against our thoughts and feelings can lead to darkness. The darkness is not forever, there is always a light. The light can be found by embracing our interests, eating healthily, exercising and speaking with people who care. Religion, medication, love and companionship can always help but some of these things can push us either way. The signpost tells me that either path is infinite but not specific. My inner self tries to pull me each way. Having a dark side is not a choice, ignoring it often is”.

Sam, Hahnemann House, Crisis Centre.

Sam’s last sentence, shows one of the key aspects to recovery. Understanding and accepting that times do get hard, we do end up in dark places and we all have dark thoughts. To stay well we must not ignore this or try to run away from it. The whole picture speaks to me of choices, control over our lives and acceptance.
Not all recovery art seems at first sight to be very positive. Many of the pieces reflect how the person felt at that moment. These pictures can seem quite dark and sad but always appear to show hope.

Anon, Hahnemann House

“the empty black void fills my head
its dark, lonely and scary
tiny flickers of hope dimly edge in
one day they will fill me up
and I will be whole again”

The artist wrote this to accompany their picture. It is both powerful and poetic and shows that even the darkest of pictures can reveal hope and strength. The words are beautiful in their simplicity and strength. Like the picture they convey so very much both with precision and such wonderful brevity.

A great gift!
Bianca, Hahnemann House

Bianca drew this picture on a day when she was feeling particularly low. Of this drawing she said, “there is no light coming through the window, that’s how I feel.”

Two weeks later she returned to the group and painted this:

She reflected to me that she felt at times as if she was stuck down a well. Down there she said she felt that no one could hear her asking for help.

When I look at this picture I’m struck by the brightness and joy above the ground. When I compare this to the first picture of the window with no light coming in, I can see the transition in her mood and her ability to describe her situation with more hope. This picture feels hopeful to me. The roots also seem to indicate growth and a connection between above and below the ground.
During our time at the Crisis Centre we met a man called Rob. Rob had not really ever done any art and initially found the process quite challenging. He went on to really embrace the process and to enjoy making art. He has bought his own art equipment and intends to pursue his new found passion as something he can do just for himself and purely for the joy of doing it. It’s safe to say that Rob surprised himself in the degree of his creativity. These are some of Rob’s pictures:

Rob described this picture as one that shows hope through colour, like a recovery flag. It shows the spectrum of mood through the spectrum of colour.

Rob went on to start using paint in his next picture.

This picture shows the bright sun and blue sky with the dark clouds that Rob often feels amongst.

It seems as though the bright sun is pushing the dark clouds away.
I talked to June about this very arresting picture and she told me that it reflects all women that are depressed. June said, “We all do that. We all dress up but even when you’re dressed up the tears still come.” I feel that this describes depression perfectly. What a great picture.

June added, “People say why don’t you cheer up? Everyone wants to be happy and cheerful but you can’t always change the way you’re feeling. A lot of depression is based on fear.” I think I would certainly agree.

This picture of June’s was painted on a bright sunny day and really appeared to reflect how she was feeling. The difference to tone and form of the two pictures are striking and can be seen as a representation of the recovery process itself.

June’s confidence as an artist appeared to grow through the course and I was struck by her ability to express her emotions through her art.
“The trees on the left have been damaged by the wind and have fallen. They show the chaos of life. The trees on the right have grown out of the chaos straighter, stronger and true. New growth out of disorder and chaos,” Calvin, Kings Park.

Calvin, Kings Park

Calvin was quite unsure of the value of art as a method of self expression; more than anyone we met on this project he showed the greatest increase of confidence in his creative abilities. His art showed such great expression combined with real insight into his own mental state.

Gordon, Kings Park

Gordon reported that he felt very little emotional connection to this picture. However, to me it showed great skill and passion. His ability to show depth of field and movement made us all feel a little in awe of his skill. This humble gentleman was very modest about his abilities. He hadn’t painted for a long time but I think he felt more confident as after this he reported that he’ll be taking up painting
David’s print-block picture shows just how powerful simple design can be. This was one of David’s first pictures from the first day of our time at Kings Park. It shows the ordered nature of David’s mind and how he felt at the time he couldn’t really express himself in a more freer form.

David, Kings Park

However, this was David’s last picture. A stick painting, painted on the floor on a large piece of white paper. Instead of a brush a long bamboo stick is used and some black poster paint. In the centre of the room was a vase of flowers. This is David’s painting of those flowers.

I really like this picture. It shows David’s passion for order and symmetry but there is a looseness in it that shows that he had really learnt to express himself more by the end of the project.

Well done David!

David, Kings Park
Peter, Kings Park

Like David, Peter enjoyed creating print-block pictures and this is one of my favourites. There is just enough disorder in it to reflect Peter’s nature. Peter is a funny and expressive chap. Like David his stick picture was a triumph and shows just how far he has also come in being able to let go and express himself.

This stick drawing shows a great deal of confidence and assertiveness in his mark making. Peter really didn’t hold back when he made this painting. It was great to see him painting this with such flourish and passion.
This is a great photo of the artist at work! Gordon again shows his creative ability and control.

Gordon, Kings Park

The finished painting!

This painting shows a depth of field that draws the eye and makes the image standout and not look flat on the page. It creates a sense of movement and three dimensional form. This is created in part by the use of two colours. What a great picture.
Audrey, Kings Park

Audrey’s painting has a lovely story to go with it. This scene depicts a place that Audrey used to describe to her children when they were little and couldn’t sleep. She said that this image holds many lovely memories for her and she thinks about it occasionally. I was so pleased that she was able to share it with us.

**Audrey’s fantastic stick painting!**

Lots of movement and expression, with the slight shadow and line of the table giving this picture a sense of solidity.

The Kings Park stick paintings were a revelation to me. We all painted them and found it such a freeing experience. You really have to let go of any sense of being able to control your marks and in doing so you naturally make marks that count because they are made in a spontaneous way.
Art from Kimmeridge Court

This beautiful picture shows Millie’s thoughts of what constitutes Recovery, Freedom and Hope. The face has a delicate touch and the hair shows a great deal of skill in the layering of paint in order to create this wonderful picture combining painting, drawing and collage.

This painting shows how regardless of whether you’re sure of what something is or even means, it can still be compelling and engaging. I don’t know what this is or what it means to Millie. It’s not something she wanted to discuss. Regardless, I love the shape and the subtle tones of red. The heart gives it that sense of hope that Millie hinted at in her previous painting.
Leila, Kimmeridge Court

Sometimes the simplest descriptions are the most powerful, Leila said,

“**Illness is grey, recovery is about learning to see colours again.**”

Leila, Kimmeridge Court

This colourful picture contains the Hebrew words “Shabbat” meaning Sabbath and “Shalom” meaning peace. Leila illustrates well her beliefs and her statement of recovery being about seeing colours again. The picture above of the boat shows someone looking out to sea, perhaps they are learning to see colours again? Or searching for their own recovery?
Nicky, Kimmeridge Court

Nicky’s picture is very powerful, your eye is naturally drawn to the centre of the picture, around which are all the words and thoughts which are meaningful to Nicky in regards to her own recovery process.

Laura, Kimmeridge Court

This picture makes me smile, I love the energy and the movement. Laura completed this quickly and intuitively and called it an, “experiment” and “stormy” she also said that it was as though, “light was trying to get through” and it showed that, “recovery is a bumpy ride.”
This picture was created by Jodie. It represents aspects of her sense of self. Of this picture she said, “All the pictures within the whole piece show who I am. I feel that I am in a dark place. Lady Gaga shows my self expression through dress, hair and make-up. Natalie Portman is in a bad place with an all consuming drive. Princess Diana represents the striving to be perfect, I identify with this, wanting to be perfect for her whole family, whatever she did wasn’t right. The models are what I want to be in my head. It’s what I’d like to be like, but even when I look at the picture to me they don’t look perfect. I don’t like the models stomach or the tops of her legs.”

I really appreciate Jodie’s honest description of her picture. It shows us the struggle that a lot of us have with our own views of ourselves and just how that can shape our outlook on all aspects of our lives.
The pictures on this page were all created by Madi

These amazing circles are cut out of magazines. They are precise and beautiful and show a patience and dexterity that has to be seen to be believed. This picture was made over the four days that we were at Kimmeridge Court. Of this picture Madi said,

“The black circle is where I feel I am, the pink is where I want to be and the blue shows the journey between those points. The circles represent events and the concentric circles are the repercussions. They ripple through my life, sometimes negative other times positive. The more positive the events or the more positively I see the events the more I move towards recovery.”
Conclusion

This Recovery Art project was the inspired idea of Jackie Lawson, East Dorset’s Wellbeing and Recovery Partnership (WaRP) lead. It was enabled through the support of James Barton, Director of Mental Health Services and Becky Aldridge, General Manager of the Dorset Mental Health Forum who both had the vision to fund this pilot project. Both Babs and I would like to thank Jackie for suggesting our involvement.

Babs has reflected that, “It has been such a privilege to be involved in the creation of art that is so closely reflects someones true feelings and struggles. I feel very trusted when I witness the bravery of those people who are willing to share so much through art. To think that I was able to help in some way in that process has brought me a great deal of personal satisfaction.”

We would therefore both like to thank all the kind, generous and brave creative people that we have met throughout this project.

Leila, Kimmeridge Court
I would like to leave the last word to Rachel who we met at Kimmeridge Court at St Ann’s. Rachel created this painting and describes her own recovery beautifully, thank you.

“The Light, by Rachel

“My piece represents hope in my road to recovery. There have been times when everything has felt lost, dark and lonely but now I look into the warmth of ‘The Light’ with hope for a bright future.” Rachel, Kimmeridge Court